

My Conversion to Inter-religious Mission

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My Past Suspicion

As a Pastor, taught and brought up within the reformed tradition that insisted on ‘faith alone’ through ‘Christ alone’, I have always been sceptical of other religions.¹ This background made me to be resentful against non-Christians and saw believers of other faiths as ‘anonymous Christians’ as Paul Knitter would call them.² I saw myself in the exclusivist’s family that maintained that salvation is given only to those who make an explicit commitment to Jesus Christ.³

I read Acts 4:12 and John 14:6 to justify my orientation and counted those outside Christianity as lost. Pope Boniface VIII in his declaration maximised my stand in relation to the ‘Otherness’ when he says;

“We are required by faith to believe and hold that there is one holy, catholic and apostolic Church; we firmly believe it and unreservedly profess it; outside it there is neither salvation nor remission of sin...”⁴

Alan Race disagrees with Pope Boniface VIII by saying ‘Christians know only in part and must never give the impression that they have a monopoly of religious truth.’⁵

Race quoting M.A.C. Warren insisted that;

“Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on men’s dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival.”⁶

Thus, as I went round the Mosque and Gurdwara at Handsworth on the 29th of January 2011, I felt a ‘*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*’-a mystery both frightening and fascinating as Rudolf Otto has termed it. I could have a feel of God and was wondering if this God could be the same one I knew. And as argued by Knitter, I was fascinated by this very strangeness that frightened me.⁷ Thus, Knitter concludes that the ‘religious Other’ is ‘*totaliter aliter*’- the utterly Other, ‘the incommensurable, the incomprehensible’ yet a fascinating inviting mystery.⁸ Knitter sees the mysteries of the ‘religious Other’ as fascinating, yet, inviting and in this way he insists on the plurality of religious dialogue.⁹

As stated by Paul Knitter, getting into other religions, one discovers more than expected. My conclusion was that ‘the old exclusivist model of Christianity as light and other religions as darkness didn’t fit the facts’¹⁰ after my visit.

The Muslim Mosque

In the mosque I was reminded of my Sunday school knowledge by Hassan Ali who told me about the common ground¹¹ between Christianity and Islam, which together with Judaism look to

¹ Paul Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions, Multi-faith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 6

² Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, p. 6

³ Martin Forward, *Inter-religious Dialogue, A Short Introduction* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2001), p. 39

⁴ Martin Forward, *Inter-religious Dialogue*, p. 10

⁵ Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism, Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1993), p. 26

⁶ Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, p. 3

⁷ Paul Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, p. 4

⁸ Paul Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, p. 12

⁹ Paul Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, p. 12

¹⁰ Paul Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, p. 12

Abraham as the proto-monotheist, friend of God and father of the covenant between God and his people.¹² As we discussed with Hassan Ali, I discovered that mission among the Muslims was holistic from birth to death.¹³

“This is the reason why the Mosque was operating a mortuary”, Ali told me. To further prove their holistic mission that was all inclusive, Ali read out Qur’ān 4:1 that says;

“...reverence God, through whom ye demand your mutual rights, and reverence the womb that bore you; for God ever watches over you.”

His idea was also to establish the position of Muslims on gender issues. According to him, women are not just looked upon as equals to men but in some cases they command greater respect than men. The sad note in our discussion was when Ali said Muslims are equal to terrorists. This, he said is the perception of the world outside his faith. On the other hand, Ali said; the political and economic hardship, in which the Muslims find themselves, pushes them to see no difference between Christians and the West. Thus, any attack on Muslim countries by the West is also an attack by Christians. As argued by Ataullah Siddiqui, to destroy this perception of each other and bring about lasting cordial relationship is to take the first step towards meeting the ‘Other’ and to recognise the ‘Otherness of the Other’ as they see themselves.¹⁴

One other interesting point he raised was that Mohamed, the Muslim leader is not found in the Christian Bible. Yet, the Qur’ān gives a greater number of honourable titles to Jesus than to any other figure in the past.¹⁵

Three sūras (chapters) of the Qur’ān are named after references to Jesus. He is spoken of in reverence in the Qur’ān.¹⁶ This was an amazing revelation that confirmed Christianity as an older religion, and my knowledge of Islam was broadened.

Sikhs Gurdwara

Arriving at the Gurdwara on the same day, the experience was that of community existence, where people shared their talents and resources for the well-being of all. At worship, I found out that both men and women had the privileged of sitting at the ‘holy of holies’ and reading from the Guru Granth Sahib¹⁷ (sacred scriptures) as they led the faithfuls in worshipers.

I was told by Ekambir Manas that Sikh Gurus taught that all human beings should live with dignity, self-respect and grace as children of God. They should not be subjected, oppressed or disrespected due to gender or social position. In this regard, Manas said the Gurus initiated practical reforms which made the spiritual journey openly equal to all and recognised everyone’s inherent dignity as a spark of the same divine flame. The interesting thing he said was that Guru Gobind Singhji, the 10th Guru said, Sikh followers should ‘recognise all of humanity as one.’ I could recognise that the Sikh religion had an open door for interfaith relationships and dialogue. At the end of the visit, I was treated with hospitality and shared in their fellowship meal.

After my weekend at Handsworth, I realised that in the 21st century and beyond, to be religious would mean to be interreligious. I could recall that the Christian faith was born in a Jewish milieu and soon came into contact with the Graeco-Roman world.¹⁸ From then on, I made a shift from exclusivism, -a theory that divides people into ‘we’ and ‘they’ those who ‘are saved’ and those

¹¹ Paul Heck, *Common Ground, Islam, Christianity, and Religious Pluralism* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), p. 1

¹² Paul Heck, *Common Ground*, p. 1

¹³ Paul Heck, *Common Ground*, p. 1

¹⁴ Ataulla Siddiqui, *A Muslim View of Christianity, in Islam and Inter-Faith Relations* by Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Lloyd Ridgeon (London: SCM Press, 2007), p. 135

¹⁵ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur’ān* (Oxford: One World Publications, 1965), p.16

¹⁶ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur’ān*, p. 16

¹⁷ The Guru Granth Sahib contains the scriptures of the Sikhs. It is an anthology of prayers and hymns which contain the actual words and verses as uttered by the Sikh Gurus. The Guru Granth Sahib, also known as the Adi Granth, consists of 1430 pages and has 5864 verses. Its contents are referred to as bani or gurbani.

¹⁸ Available from: www.sierraf.org/articles/Ariarajah.pdf [Accessed 12/04/2011].

who 'are not saved' those on the 'inside and those on the 'outside',¹⁹ and also shifted from inclusivism, that does not accept the equality of all religions but insist that Christ is in every religion.²⁰ I learnt that the place of meeting between faiths is not meant to affirm that all faiths are equal or in essence the same, but that God has been revealing himself to all peoples throughout time.²¹ The tension here is that each faith is bound by its own historical tradition. This study has helped me to widen my perspective about the understanding of God in every religion. I was able to look in to the various traditions and cultures through which people try to explain God's involvements in their historical situations. One needs to develop a very good listening capacity to arrive an understanding of other faith traditions. My journey in interreligious dialogue is a short one as compared to the Church's journey towards the acceptance of the 'Otherness'.

Historical Background

For many centuries Christianity was the leading religion. The state was part of the church and the emperor governed the church and thus the church was very influential.²² Emperor Theodosius during his reign, decreed in 380 that all citizens of his empire should be Christians and non-Christians were considered members of cults.²³ This made the Christian faith an imperial and patriarchal religion that claimed an authority that was meant for God.

However, enlightenment challenged the authenticity and the authorship of the Christian faith.²⁴ After the dreams of Edinburgh 1910 were not fulfilled the second world mission conference that held in Jerusalem in 1928, was quite different.²⁵ The First World War provoked by "Christian" countries had profoundly challenged the ideal of the Western civilization as embodiment of the gospel.²⁶ Hence, at the Jerusalem conference, mission was strongly debated. Two major questions came up on which no real consensus emerged: the relation between the Christian message and other religions, and the theological interpretation of Christian social and political involvement.²⁷ Christianity started losing its hegemony. Thus, in 1928 at the Jerusalem conference, it was resolved that Christianity should relate with peoples of other faiths.²⁸ The enlightenment paradigm proved that people could survive on facts without religion.²⁹

In 1930s some theologians and missionaries advocated the "fulfilment theory" which strongly maintained that the Christian faith "comprehends" and "fulfils" all the partial truths found in the other religions, while at the same time purging them from their errors and supplementing them with truths and values that they do not in themselves possess.³⁰

Since then there has been an evolution of this concept of dialogue with other religions. This evolution also pushed the World Council of Churches (WCC) to start brain storming on this whole issue of interreligious dialogue. Therefore in 1963, the WCC declared that witness was the witness of Christians to men of other faiths. In 1964, it changed to the encounter with men of other beliefs. In 1965, it became Christian dialogue with men of other faiths. In 1970, it evolved to dialogue

¹⁹ S. J. Samartha, *One Christ Many Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 102

²⁰ Michael J. Vlach, *What are Pluralism, Inclusivism, and Exclusivism?* Available from: www.theologicalstudies.org/pluralism.html [Accessed 12/04/2011]

²¹ Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, p. 60

²² David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 474

²³ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 474

²⁴ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 475

²⁵ Available from: www.oikoumene.org/en/who-are-we/organisation-structure/consultative-bodies/world-mission-and-evangelism/history.html [Accessed 12/04/2011].

²⁶ Available from: www.oikoumene.org/en/who-are-we/organisation-structure/consultative-bodies/world-mission-and-evangelism/history.html [Accessed 12/04/2011].

²⁷ Available from: www.oikoumene.org/en/who-are-we/organisation-structure/consultative-bodies/world-mission-and-evangelism/history.html [Accessed 12/04/2011].

²⁸ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 475

²⁹ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 475

³⁰ John Seamands, *Tell it Well, Communicating the Gospel Across Cultures* (Chennai: Mission Educational Books, 2000) p.43-44

between men of living faiths and in 1977; it became dialogue in community (with women involved)³¹

Basically, interfaith dialogue was understood as an encounter between people who live by different faith traditions, in an atmosphere of mutual trust and acceptance. Dialogue was seen as a way not only to become informed about the faiths of others but also to rediscover essential dimensions of one's own faith tradition. The benefits of removing historical prejudices and enmities as well as the new possibilities for working together for common good were recognized and affirmed.³²

Interreligious Space as an Option and a Shift

In justifying my stand in this theory, the following questions must be dealt with, namely;

- 1) Why an interreligious space?
- 2) What is this space?
- 3) How can this space be created for dialogue?
- 4) Who are those to create this space?
- 5) What kind of space will this be? A pluralistic or inclusive space?
- 6) What will be the out come after the creation of this space?

The answers to the above questions can be deduced within the next paragraphs.

To begin with, I have opted for interreligious space as an option because it goes far beyond exclusivist attitude that divides people into 'we' and 'they', those who 'are saved' and those who 'are not saved', those on the 'inside and those on the 'outside'.³³ My option also goes beyond inclusivism that does not accept the equality of all religions but insist that Christ is in every religion,³⁴ and even beyond pluralism that believes that all major religions are equally valid and lead to God and salvation.³⁵ This does not mean that my belief in Christ is watered down and this does not make me an atheist. Rather, Interreligious space offers the opportunity for all created humanity to belong to one another. Since the world we live in is religious in itself, being part of God's created world will enable us to coexist. This coexistence creates an interreligious space that enables dialogue at all levels; including dialogue with God's created order.

This space is the free communicative space that enables people of other faiths to be able to express themselves not as subordinates but as equals with the other 'Otherness', in their search for a stable universe. The free space is what will enable people at grass roots to discuss and exchange views, beliefs and ideas as they come across people of other faith in their daily activities.

The interreligious space can be created when we give free room for action based on the crises threatening 'mother' earth. This is where global responsibility for humanity and ecological sustainability is required.³⁶ This space will also be created when humanity at all levels is called to participate in enhancing the common good of humanity's struggles for survival. Thus, interreligious space will encourage faith communities at all levels, i.e. from the top to the grass roots, to embrace a spirituality of life and transformation, rooted in God's loving grace.³⁷

In this way, everyone will be involved in the whole process of interreligious space dialogue. This right of individual involvement within the interreligious space dialogue will go beyond the pluralistic theory of equality of religions to show that equality among humans goes far more beyond religious equality. Thus, the ability to create such spaces will strengthen people of other faiths to

³¹ Available from: www.sierraf.org/articles/Ariarajah.pdf [Accessed 12/04/2011].

³² Available from: www.sierraf.org/articles/Ariarajah.pdf [Accessed 12/04/2011].

³³ S. J. Samartha, *One Christ Many Religions*, p. 102

³⁴ Michael J. Vlach, *What are Pluralism, Inclusivism, and Exclusivism?* Available from: www.theologicalstudies.org/pluralism.html [Accessed 12/04/2011]

³⁵ Michael J. Vlach, *What are Pluralism, Inclusivism, and Exclusivism?* Available from: www.theologicalstudies.org/pluralism.html [Accessed 12/04/2011]

³⁶ Paul Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, p. 79

³⁷ Available from: www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p3/agape-new.pdf [Accessed 13/04/2011]

respect one another as individuals before seeing them as faith communities. The point here is that the grassroots level must be taken seriously in the concept of interreligious space.

This is the kind of interreligious space that the Ultimate had established at the beginning of creation when he was busy creating every part of his created order. It is this authentic space that creates space for all classes of people and respects the Earth as God's created space and all other created beings. The world God created with different ecological conditions express his uniqueness in various ways and in every part of His created order. Hence religions have the unique right to enjoy their space as they worship God in thanksgiving within their space. This is space that must be respected by the 'Other centeredness'. God is generous and gives space to each part of the universe and conditions the creatures occupying each space to live favourably within their given space enviously. God enables them to claim their heritage from their given surroundings that influences their relationship with God and with one another. Religiously, religions and peoples have grown up with their thought forms of God and have honoured, worshiped and venerated God in diverse ways acceptable to God.

Thus, each religious space allotted by the Ultimate to his people has a religious bearing on the people. If he has revealed himself in Christianity as the Saviour, it is the Ultimate who grants that space to that particular faith and has incarnated and created worship space for the other faiths in ways that are understandable by them in their various contexts.

Conclusion

Interreligious space will enable all to live in peace, unity and love. There will be the acceptance of one another and humanity would experience God in every part of his created order, and no religion would claim superiority over the other. The manner, in which God is worshiped and expressed in a creative way within community living, would be a determining factor of religious excellence. The reign of God has space for all. Therefore, interreligious space must create community space that gives the poor, the marginalised and the down trodden the ability to exist. Stability of earth would be guaranteed, if we share our religious spaces in love to one another and with the earth. This interreligious space will enable us to appreciate the worship space of the 'Other centeredness' and learn to understand them from their perspective. From this perspective, dialogue can be meaningful and liberative among existing religions of the world.

It is in this light that Paul Knitter has argued that an interreligious dialogue must include a theology of liberation.³⁸

The risk of trying to transplant one's religion into another religious space, or trying to occupy or disrupt the 'Other centeredness' just because one thinks of his/her space as superior, will lead to conflicts and disorder of the ordered universe created by the Ultimate.

Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights³⁹ states that; "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."⁴⁰

This will enhance relationship not just among religions but among different classes of people within different religions.

³⁸ Paul Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, p. 14

³⁹ Available from: www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml [Accessed 12/04/2011].

⁴⁰ Available from: www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml [Accessed 12/04/2011].

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